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Psalm 95
Exodus 17:1–7
John 4:3–42

"Just then his disciples came. They were astonished . . ."
John 4:27 (NRSV)

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity remind us that civilizations survive
not by strength but by how they respond to the weak;
not by wealth but by the care they show for the poor;
not by power but by their concern for the powerless.
The ironic yet utterly human lesson of history is that
what renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable.
The ultimate value we should be concerned to maximize is human dignity—
the dignity of all human beings, equally, as children of the creative, redeeming God.

Jonathan Sacks
The Dignity of Difference:
How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For many years I have begun my sermons with a little prayer: "Startle us, O God." Some of you like that prayer and tell me you miss it when I change it. Some have told me that they've been startled quite enough all week long, thank you very much, and the last thing they need on Sunday morning is to be startled again. I use that prayer for myself, if truth were told, because it is my experience that the capacity to be startled, surprised, astonished, can and does become diminished in us. We are so preoccupied, so focused on our goals, on our list of things to accomplish, people to see, calls to make,

that we shut down whatever capacity we have for wonder and astonishment because it is a distraction from what we think is important.

In any event, “Startle us, O God” seems like a good way to begin, because God, in the Bible at least, is astonishing, and when God acts, people are startled. I’m interested in keeping that idea, that capacity alive. Religion can become predictable, routine. But God, John Updike once wrote, “whatever else God may be, God should not be uninteresting; God should not be pat” (*Roger’s Version*, p. 24).

“They were astonished,” the Fourth Gospel says about Jesus’ friends one day. It is in a brilliantly crafted short story in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John—like any good short story, packed with rich detail. It is, first, about water, that most mundane, most extraordinary element. You can live without food for a month, but you can only live a few days without water.

Water carves valleys, floods entire islands, sustains life everywhere. A symbol of our age is bottled water. In a devotion he wrote for us last week, our own James Finn Garner, an author, says that “in Lincoln Park in the summer a bottle of designer water is as ubiquitous a personal accessory as a wristwatch.”

The detail that jumped out of this rich short story this time was that almost throw-away observation “They were astonished.”

John wants to make sure we understand that Jesus’ disciples are astonished at his behavior, and the implication is that if you read this story correctly and understand what is transpiring, you will be astonished, too.

They are walking, Jesus and his entourage are—the twelve, maybe a few women and other friends—from Judea in the south back to their home in Capernaum, in Galilee, in the north. For some reason they take a detour through Samaria. John says, “He had to go through Samaria,” but the people who first read this story knew that wasn’t true. You don’t have to go through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee. You only go there if you want to—which no good Jew does.

Samaria is a despicable place. Samaritans were regarded as inferior, racially, religiously, and socially. For something like 700 years Jews and Samaritans had been arguing and generally hating one another as only members of the same family can argue and hate. Think of the bitterness, the violence, between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims or the hostility and verbal violence between Christians. Originally it had to do with a disagreement about whose holy temple was the real one and whose city was the really holy city. But it had disintegrated into a particularly nasty racial prejudice fueled by religion.

So, the entourage is over the border, in Samaria, and they're not happy about it, and besides, it's high noon and blazing hot and they are hungry and thirsty. So Jesus' friends go off to the nearest town, leaving him sitting alone beside a well.

A woman approaches with a bucket, a Samaritan woman drawing water. Jesus asks her for a drink. Now there are some things going on here that are not immediately apparent. First, women, who do the water drawing and carrying, come to the well in the cool of the early morning or early evening, never in the heat of midday. This woman doesn't come to the well with the other women of the village. Second, Jews don't ask Samaritans for a drink. A Jew would rather die of thirst than drink from a Samaritan cup. One thinks automatically of segregated drinking fountains in the American South a generation ago. Third, a Jewish male, particularly a rabbi, does not speak with a single woman, publicly, who is not his wife, ever.

A peculiar conversation ensues: "May I have a drink?" "Jews don't drink with Samaritans," she responds. "I can give you living water," Jesus says. "How can you do that? You don't even have a bucket," she answers. "If you drink living water you will never be thirsty again," Jesus says. "Then I'll have some," she responds.

They talk some more about religion; it's almost bantering. They talk about her marital status, which she lies about, but he somehow knows about. As it turns out, she has been married five times, which is two over the limit, and she's currently living with a man who is not her husband. And now we discover why she is at the well at noon, in the searing heat of midday, and not in the evening with the other women. She's a disgrace. The others will have nothing to do with her. Everywhere she goes people stare, make snide comments; men aim obscenities or sexually suggestive barbs. It's better to go to the well alone, even if it is hot. The fact that she is living, unmarried, with man number six also tells us that she has pretty much given up on organized religion. She no longer even pretends to be part of the faith community, because she is not welcome. She is an outcast. Religion wants nothing to do with her. She certainly couldn't be ordained in the Presbyterian church.

Just then the disciples return with lunch. They are astonished. Startled. What they are seeing challenges some of their most precious assumptions. Here he is, a Jew, sharing a drinking cup with a Samaritan, a man conversing with a woman in broad daylight, a holy man bantering with an immoral woman.

The woman, in the meantime, is charmed, astonished, so taken with all this she drops her water bucket and runs to town to tell anyone who will listen

about this amazing man who drank with her and talked with her and even knew abut her marital status and did not condemn her. It didn't seem to matter to him.

What Jesus has done is so extraordinary the whole town comes out to see him, and then the most astonishing thing of all happens. Remember Jews hate Samaritans and Samaritans hate Jews equally. The Samaritans invite the Jews to stay with them for a while and, remarkably, they do, for two days. What a picture—Jews and Samaritans, men and women, walking back to town together, eating together for two days, sleeping under the same roofs together. Astonishing.

Jesus pushes beyond seven centuries of religious divisiveness, racial prejudice, gender marginalization, moral exclusivism, to show—for two days at least—what God's kingdom on earth looks like. Jesus refuses to be constricted by religious and cultural convention and in the process transforms a predicament into a person; a theological and moral problem becomes a human being; a marginalized outcast becomes a woman, a child of God. No wonder she runs back to town to tell everybody about it.

Jesus simply refuses to be constrained by cultural and religious difference. And in a world where cultural and religious differences divide and turn toxic and violent, nothing is more critical.

Jonathan Sacks is Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, and he has written an important book, *The Dignity of Difference*. Sacks writes, "I see a rising crescendo of ethnic tensions, civilizational clashes, and the use of religious justification for acts of terror, a clear and present danger to humanity. For too long, the pages of history have been stained by blood shed in the name of God."

Sacks believes we need to be converted from thinking of cultural and religious differences as something to be overcome to regarding difference as something to be affirmed and celebrated.

He calls it the *Dignity of Difference* and bases it not on sociology or political philosophy but on theology, on the image of God in every single human being. "The test of faith," he says, "is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, and ideals, are different from mine? If not, I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his" (p. 201).

Reaching across the boundaries of culture and religion is, I believe, the most urgent mission priority before us. Affirming the other, as a person, a child of God, is the clear mandate of our Lord himself.

It is a particular challenge to reach across the divide of religion, perhaps the most difficult challenge of all, as Presbyterians and Jews are now experiencing as a result of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) decision to begin a process of divestment from Israel and consequent anger in the Jewish community. Irving Greenberg, Professor at City College, New York City, former chair of the U.S. Holocaust Museum and an Orthodox rabbi, has written a remarkable book, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity.* It is a courageous attempt to redefine Judaism and Christianity, not as competing and conflicting truth claims but as covenant partners who need each other for their individual integrity. Jews need Christians because Christianity is an authentic outgrowth of Messianic Judaism. Christians need Jews because Judaism is the family in which we were born. Greenberg urges both communities to listen to and take seriously the most important beliefs of the other, not in order to erase or disguise differences but to appreciate and learn from them. There is nothing about crucifixion and resurrection that Jews cannot understand, this brave rabbi writes. Likewise there is nothing about waiting for the final fulfillment of the messianic promise and the kingdom of God which is here, but always coming, that Christians cannot understand. When I read that, I wrote in the margin “Wow!”

It does, however, challenge us deeply. A world in which truth claims that are different from our own makes us terribly uncomfortable precisely because we have been taught and have thoroughly absorbed the idea that our truth is the only truth and that our mission is to convince the other to come over to our side, to wage war against the infidel in the name of God, theologically if not militarily.

It is not always popular to advocate for a more inclusive way of thinking. Rabbi Greenberg was astonished at the hostility his ideas evoked from his own colleagues. He was forced to submit to the Jewish equivalent of a heresy trial until charges were dropped.

At the opening session of the Fourth Church–Congregation Sinai dialogues last Wednesday, I said that I do not believe that the Bible teaches that Christianity supersedes or replaces Judaism.

The next day someone wrote a very angry letter and told me in no uncertain terms that “I was tinkering with the very underpinnings of our faith in order to make a fool’s bargain.”

Is our faith authenticated and validated by its exclusiveness, by who we think gets in and who therefore is left out? Is that really what Jesus taught?

The picture in front of us today is of a Lord pushing beyond cultural convention—and seven centuries of religious certainty—to include and embrace an outsider, a moral and theological and social outcast. The picture before us today is that group of former enemies, Jews and Samaritans, arm in arm, walking back to town to sit down to eat and drink together.

The picture before us today is that woman, who, in the presence of Jesus, was no longer a statistic, a racial minority, a moral embarrassment, but a human being. Jesus loved her back into her personhood, her innate human dignity. He saved her—saved her life literally.

It is a miracle whenever that happens even, maybe particularly, in tragic circumstances, when it is easier not to think about individual human beings, but to use safe terms like “battle casualties or “collateral damage.” I’m grateful to the *Tribune* for translating American casualties in Iraq from statistics to real people. I read them every morning: 21-year-old Marine Corporal John T. Olson who gave his mother a gold pendant before leaving for his third tour of duty and a note thanking her for all she had done for him and who died last week when a roadside bomb exploded beside his vehicle.

And do you worry, as I do, about the thousands, the tens of thousands, of innocent Iraqis who are the collateral damage—each an individual, a precious child of God, created in God’s image?

I was privileged to read recently an exchange of e-mails between two physicians from Northwestern Memorial Hospital, one here in Chicago, Stephen Ondra, and one in Baghdad, Jeff Poffenbarger.

Jeff is trying to treat a 10-year-old Iraqi girl with severe scoliosis and other critical complications. He knows that the required surgery really should happen here in Chicago and he’s trying to figure out how to get his young patient to Children’s Memorial. His friend Steve is contacting the hospital, physicians, Ronald McDonald House, the government, trying to find funding for transportation costs.

Then it becomes apparent that the project will be very difficult to pull off, maybe impossible, and the little girl’s condition is seriously deteriorating. So the two doctors begin to discuss Jeff doing the surgery in Baghdad, with careful coaching from Steve in Chicago. The e-mails became highly technical at this point.

And then Jeff’s last e-mail reads:

> Steve:

> I'm very sorry to tell you that the little girl and her father were most likely killed by a truck bomb at the gate to the green zone. On the day she had an appointment with me, a truck bomb blew up at the entrance and killed many Iraqis waiting to get in. She did not show up for her appointment and I have not heard from her since. I went and talked to the American guards—none remembered her specifically, but one recalled a blue jacket like one she always wore on the body of a little girl. She and her father were faithful about coming here for their appointments so I fear the worst.
>
> This is a hard city for the little ones.
>
> Jeff

I read Steve's response gratefully:

> Jeff:
>
> I found your note heartbreaking but appreciated it. It reminds me of just how difficult and real and dangerous life is, particularly in Iraq. You, our soldiers, and the innocent people of Iraq are in my mind and prayers, a bit more so today. I will pass this story on. It helps remind us that every day news stories have a human face. I hope you return safely and soon. You are all heroes. Hang in there.
>
> Best wishes,
> Steve Ondra

It is always a miracle when a statistic becomes a face. Even in heartbreaking tragedy, the grace of God in Jesus Christ transforms anonymity into individuality.

The heart of our faith is a wondrous love that did not condemn a Samaritan woman for immorality, did not exclude her because of her religion or race or gender, but graciously accepted her and loved her back to her humanity, her God-given status as a child of God.

It is a love that is offered to each of us: to you, no matter who you are or how excluded you have been. It is a wondrous love that comes to you to affirm who you are and to remind you that whatever words others may use to define you, whatever words and ideas you have come to use to describe yourself, the one permanent, unchanging, indestructible thing about you is that you are God's child, and God's own Son came to make sure you never forget that.

Jesus took his friends into Samaria one day to make certain they understood.

Jim Garner wrote, “To receive this living water we don’t have to drag our buckets to the well and drag them home. We just need to ask for it and it rains all over us.”

Living water.

Astonishing.

Amen.